

## Mariela Muñoz

### Citizenship, Motherhood, and Transsexual Politics in Argentina (1943–2017)

Patricio Simonetto and Johana Kunin

Abstract: Mariela Muñoz became the first transsexual widely socially recognized as a mother in Argentina. She emerged as a leading figure during her struggle to recover legal custody of three of her children, which had been previously annulled by a judge. Moreover, in 1997 she became the first transsexual woman to obtain the alteration of her sex description in her identity document. This text analyzes the making of Mariela Muñoz's motherhood repertoires to redefine political, social, and intimate citizenship. It argues that her politics were paradoxical, in that she appealed to traditional meanings of womanhood such as fulfillment through motherhood and the duty of care for others. On the other hand, these uses of key cultural symbols displaced the imagined margins for *travestis* and *transsexuales* and helped her enjoy popular support.

*Keywords* transsexual, motherhood, kinship, citizenship, Argentina

It's August 1993. Outside a police station, fifty people wait in support of their friend and neighbor. It's been a month since Mariela Muñoz was imprisoned, accused of child abduction and forgery. She is the mother of seventeen foster children that adopted her as their mother.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly, Mariela leaves the building and joins the crowd. A cameraman push through them to get a clear shot of the first well-known Argentine transsexual mother. Mariela hugs one of her elder daughters and her grandson, and presents them to the TV cameras: "Here is my family." Mariela is covered in tears, she cannot stop crying. The journalist asks her how it feels to be free, and she replies, "I am happy because I am a lady, a mother and a grandmother. I am thankful for everyone who supports me" (Muñoz 1993a).

Mariela Muñoz became the first transsexual widely socially recognized as a mother in Argentina.<sup>2</sup> She emerged as a national leading figure during her struggle to recover legal

---

<sup>1</sup>In 1993 Mariela fostered seventeen children, but she raised twenty-three in total until her death.

<sup>2</sup> Mariela Muñoz defined herself as a transsexual woman. Beyond its use as a medical term since 1949, *transsexual* was used in Argentina to define people who accessed biotechnological procedures to affirm their gender beyond the one assigned to them at birth.

custody of three of her children, which had been previously annulled by a judge. Moreover, in 1997 she became the first transsexual recognized as a woman by the state.

This text analyzes the making of Mariela Muñoz's motherhood repertoires to redefine political, social, and intimate citizenship.<sup>3</sup> By stabilizing connections with maternal discourses and practices as a key axis of female citizenship in Argentina, we show how her maternal politics challenged the cis-straight-male neoliberal project, creating paths for social recognition for transsexual people.

We argue that, as local and regional accounts of mothering and maternity in Argentina carried much symbolic weight., Mariela's maternal politics socially legitimized her as a *transsexual* citizen on a broad scale. Her politics were paradoxical. On the one hand, she appealed to traditional meanings of womanhood such as fulfilment through motherhood and the duty of care for others. On the other hand, these uses of key cultural symbols displaced the imagined margins for transsexuals and helped her enjoy popular support. By placing herself in the cultural core of womanhood, Mariela achieved rights such as social recognition as a mother and a woman. Her politicization of care was also a criticism of the neoliberal patriarchal project in that she claimed to protect children abandoned by the state. However, her use of these cultural symbols also may have echoed conservative discourses that rejected abortion and socially sanctioned biological "bad mothers."

---

During the 1990s, *transsexual* became a political identity that defined those who argued that they were trapped in the "wrong body" and articulated a wider demand for state recognition and access to gender-affirmation surgeries, which were banned in Argentina. Transsexuals distinguished themselves from *travestis*, a political and social identity that designated a wider group of people who didn't adjust themselves to the male/female binary and usually did not undergo genital gender-affirmation surgeries.

<sup>3</sup> Here we address the notion of "intimate citizenship" to examine rights, obligations, recognitions, and respect around those most intimate spheres of life (Plummer 2011).

This article dialogues with the literature on kinship, politics, and cis-heteronormativity. It remarks how trans\* kinship challenges the relationships between nature and social roles (Fernández Romero 2020; Platero Méndez and Ortega Arjonilla 2017). Recent literature has studied gay and lesbian homo-parenting (Biblarz and Savci 2010); trans-parenting and queer mothering practices (Manning et al. 2015); and multi-parent families (Gibson 2014). The few existing studies on trans-parenting usually focus on technologically assisted reproduction as a main entry point to this area of study (James-Abra et al. 2015; Israel 2005). This emphasis on biological reproduction can be explained by the greater access to these procedures in the global North, in contrast to the long history of informal circuits of children fostering practices in Latin America, that is to say the practices of circulating children to be raised by non-biogenetic parents, linked to the question of mutual-help networks (Fonseca 2002 and to the community-based maternal practices of the travesti and transsexual community in Argentina (Wayar 2020). Muñoz's story contributes to rethinking this field by looking into repertoires of kinship production and into the cultural meanings of trans-parenting\* that go beyond biological reproduction.

The study of Muñoz's struggle also helps reconceptualize feminist perspectives. It challenges the limits of cis-gendered and antimaternal feminisms by showing how agendas that were initially considered conservative could lead to social transformation. It demonstrates that, even guided by traditional repertoires and without a long-term political strategy, widely visible intimate politics in specific times have shifted normative boundaries. Moreover, this political struggle highlights how a central cultural symbol such as motherhood can be appropriated by social agents as unexpected as transsexuals and can create potent identifications to try to break through the cis-heterosexual regime.

This article is organized in three sections. First, a brief biography of Mariela Muñoz is introduced. Second, we analyze the symbolic power of motherhood as a driving force for

women's agency in Argentina and as a hallmark of Mariela's politics. Third, it describes Muñoz's maternal political repertoires in the remaking of citizenship.

## **A Brief Biography of Mariela Muñoz**

Mariela Muñoz was born in Lules, Tucumán, in 1943.<sup>4</sup> She grew up in a rural, poor working-class family who worked in the sugarcane harvest. Like many others, her family migrated to work in the emerging industries. They moved to Quilmes, an industrial suburb in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, where her father became a cook in a textile factory.

In 1958 she renamed herself Mariela. In the beginning, her parents tried to "correct" her manhood by taking her to doctors and brothels. Nonetheless, after several attempts, her father decided to raise her as Mariela.

As a teenager, she was responsible for taking care of her six siblings and worked as a babysitter. When she was sixteen, she became a fortune teller and read tarot cards. Some years later, she founded an informal social shelter for children and single mothers. She created an extended family of twenty-three children and several grandchildren, many of whom came, like her, from Argentina's poor northern provinces in a quest for a better life and ended up living in the poor suburban neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.

In 1981, like other transsexuals who tried to circumvent the Argentine legal prohibition of genitalia-related surgeries, she traveled to Chile to have gender-affirmation surgery. There she had her ID forged. She also married her partner Jorge, a bricklayer.

Mariela was legally recognized as a male citizen; consequently, she was unable to legally adopt.<sup>5</sup> To achieve her desire to become a mother with Jorge, she made an

---

<sup>4</sup> Lules is a town in northwestern Argentina that in 1947 registered twelve thousand citizens.

<sup>5</sup> Argentina has allowed child adoption regardless of the adopter's sexual orientation or gender identity since 2010, after the sanction of the equal marriage law.

arrangement with two poor women who were pregnant. She promised them that if they did not have an abortion, she would raise their children. Both the mother of twins and, some time later, the mother of a little girl registered themselves at the hospital with Mariela's forged documents, which made Mariela their legal mother. In 1993 the mother of the girl accused her of abduction and document forgery. Judge Pedro Entío ordered the imprisonment of Mariela and her husband, their children were taken from them, and the children's birth certificates were annulled. Mariela was sentenced to one year in prison. She started a long struggle, which garnered international recognition. In 1995 she appeared before the International Tribunal on Human Rights Violations against Sexual Minorities (ILGHRD and CUAV 1995) in New York where she stated: "[The little girl's] mother started to blackmail me. First she demanded money. Then a lot and a house. She threatened to abuse me. When I bought a car for the kids, she demanded it in exchange for the girl. When I refused, she reported me to the police. . . . I was arrested and taken to the police station . . . the next morning, the police took away Maira and the two twins." Although Mariela won social popularity, the children were never returned to her custody.

However, Mariela never gave up and kept fighting other battles. In 1997, after years of legal struggle, a judge gave an order to rectify Mariela's birth certificate, recognizing her gender as female. That same year Mariela announced her participation in the primary election of the Justicialist Party,<sup>6</sup> but after her house was attacked by gunfire, she gave up her candidacy. Mariela continued participating in politics and in the media. She was an advisor for the National Institute against Discrimination. She spent her last days in the home of one of her sons, and after several strokes, she died in 2017.

---

<sup>6</sup> The Partido Justicialista (PJ) is the political party that represents the ideas of Juan Domingo Perón's governments (1945–51; 1951–55; 1973–74). Also known as "Peronism".

## **Motherhood and Citizenship in Argentina**

There were many historical moments when the agency of Argentine women was focused on maternalist repertoires, which placed them as leading actors who did not necessarily aspire for the subversion of gender norms. Thanks to strategic maternalisms, women made political gains while achieving visibility and certain degrees of legitimacy, like Mariela.

In Argentina since the nineteenth century, cis-women were challenged to exercise patriotic motherhood by providing virtuous citizens to the nation (Di Liscia 2008). Although motherhood has been linked to female subordination, maternity was politicized and used as a central argument in the demand for women's rights. At the turn of the twentieth century, Argentine feminists appealed to a supposed "feminine nature" to demand that the obligation to reproduce the species should have as a counterpart the recognition of rights. They reformulated femininity and motherhood within the ideology of their complementarity and equivalence (or superiority) with respect to men (Nari 2004). Moreover, they claimed that cis-women mothers would radically transform politics and society by introducing maternal thought and morality that made them superior to men. Both self-sacrifice, which implied care for others—mainly "those most in need" such as the elderly, children, cis-women, and workers—and the ethics of responsibility, which had previously been based in the private sphere, were extended to the public arena (Biernat and Ramacciotti 2013).

Argentina's history has several **examples of female agency and conservative sexual division of labor coexisting**. During Peronism, María Eva Duarte de Perón (Evita) exalted female participation by forging an impressive mobilization of cis-women to rally support for her husband's government. Cis-women's suffrage, so strongly sought by socialist feminists, was achieved by Peronism in 1947. The government promoted women's work as an option to contribute to the family's economy, without neglecting their supposed maternal and conjugal responsibilities (Barrancos 2010).

The state terrorism imposed between 1976 and 1983 meant the forced disappearance of thousands of militants, torture, prison, sexual abuse, forced exile, and child appropriation. **In** this context, the Mothers of *Plaza de Mayo* questioned the government about the whereabouts of their children and other family members and became an extraordinary civil force (D'Antonio 2018). They have struggled for the recognition of their demands during and after the last Argentine military dictatorship. Even if their collective action was born from the sexual division of labor (caring for their children), their actions broke that same division: they left the domestic sphere and confronted the de facto rulers. They took back the maternal values that the state urged them to practice in their private lives and brought them into the political sphere (Zarco 2011).

Motherhood politics and contentious actions deployed by the relatives of the victims were consolidated as key cultural symbols of social movements in postdictatorial democracy. While policymakers still imagined the mother-child bond as the target of the increasingly scarce social policies due to the neoliberal agenda, mothers emerged as public figures of street protests and civil society (Adair 2019). Repertoires of motherhood have legitimized cis-women's voices and demands for food assistance, subsidies, and housing. They have also become a platform for protest and for making cis-women's needs visible in relation to their situation of material poverty. However, this voice usually becomes legitimate only when it is compatible with the forms of femininity accepted by state social programs.

Between the neoliberal heyday of the 1990s and its consequential crisis in the early 2000s, mothers became public actors in social movements such as those in the workers' takeover of factories and the unemployed workers' movement (*piqueteros*).<sup>7</sup> Their political

---

<sup>7</sup> In the early 2000s, in response to workplace closures, a workers' wave of factory takeovers occurred in Argentina. Workers occupied factories and created cooperatives under their management.

discourse was articulated around the need to defend the factories and their families, “since taking care of the factory is taking care of their children” (Álvarez and Partenio 2010)

Since the 1980s, the gay, lesbian, feminist, and travesti movements participated in the reshaping of postdictatorship citizenship. These movements struggled against the legal codes that since the 1930s empowered policemen to deploy violent practices against sexual dissidents during both civil and military governments. In the 1990s gay movements such as the Argentine Homosexual Community and Gays for Civil Rights (1991–96) employed the language of familism to face the material consequences of HIV/AIDS by proposing a civil union bill (Bellucci 2010).

Family-oriented and maternal discourses were an important source of not only public power but also community care practices. “Travestis motherhood” was an extended practice in northern Argentina. It involved an alternative construction of bonds and kinship to achieve shelter and care that was initially neglected by travestis’ nuclear families (Wayar 2020). They bonded through shared experiences such as migration, rejection, police violence, poverty, and sex work (Berkins et al. 2015). Travesti/trans\* kinship has been conceptualized as a project of care that contrasted with cis-heterosexual violence (Wayar 2020). However, even if new conceptualizations of travesti motherhood emerged in the last decades, the efficacy of Mariela’s discourse survived. In 2013 Florencia de la V, a famous trans\* TV actress and host, answered the critics of a conservative journalist who accused her of not being a woman, holding her ID and breaking into tears while she presented herself as a “proud Argentine woman and mother” (Florencia de la V 2013)—just like Mariela two decades before.

## **Mariela Muñoz’s Repertoires of Motherhood and the Remaking of Citizenship**

The court’s involvement forced Muñoz to begin a public struggle as a mother in a difficult scenario for travestis and transsexuals. They have suffered from long-term violence such as



police persecution and social exclusion. Still today their life expectancy is only thirty-five years (Berkins et al. 2015). Their daily life was tough, and they could be stopped by a police officer while out for groceries and be accused of being scandalous in the street, or just for being dressed in clothes “contrary to their sex.” One of the most important leaders of the travesti/trans\* movement in Argentina, Lohana Berkins (2003: 65), described this life as a “daily stage of siege.”

Within this context, Mariela deployed a public political maternalism that inscribed her transsexual experience in the discourse of familism. On TV Mariela presented herself as a “symbol of Argentine mothers,” creating a link with social and political discourses that highly appreciated motherhood.

Although Mariela lost custody of the children, she was able to win a level of grassroots support that was unprecedented in times of conservative neoliberal politics. As a TV journalist expressed in 1993: “Mariela has won the support of the majority of society. It is not clear if these displays of affection come because there is more respect for the transsexuals or if it is Mariela’s maternal instinct. The truth is that she is popular, her neighbors gave her their support, and they even composed a song for her” (in Muñoz 1993b).<sup>8</sup> Mariela articulated the paradoxical meanings of motherhood to inscribe herself in social, valorized notions of womanhood related to caregiving. If the Argentine state tried to prevent children’s informal fostering practices (Pérez 2020) through the reinforcement of the biological mother’s caring role, Mariela took advantage of the social association between motherhood and womanhood but to get support for a different type of family, one not based on biological ties. She sutured her condition as a mother with her woman embodiment, pushing beyond what was considered the biological limits of gender and kinship.

---

<sup>8</sup> We translated the TV shows transcriptions.

We recognize seven principal practices of her maternal repertoire: 1) pointing out the care of her foster children; 2) shading her sexuality; 3) marking her desired motherhood, 4) performing emotionally charged agency; 5) emphasizing motherhood as a condition for being a woman; 6) taking motherhood beyond the feminist, lesbian, and gay agenda; and, finally, 7) transforming motherhood into a metaphor of social policies to critique the neoliberal project. First, her primary practice was highlighting the care she provided for her children. Mariela referred to care as an innate duty of women and mothers, an idea that she would express throughout her life. “My children are my best lawyers”—Mariela would repeat to exalt her parenting skills—“I had been a good mother: they turned out to be good and honest men and women” (ILGHRD and CUAV 1995). Mercedes, who lived with Mariela since she was four years old until she was eighteen, said: “She is a great mother, she treats us so well, she gave us all she could, she forced us to study, she has taught us to respect and to be respected” (in Muñoz 1993b). In 1997 she said on TV, “I am proud to have been raised by Mariela. I also have my biological mother, but I have a better relationship with Mariela” (in Muñoz 1997). Enrique Sanchez was born in the province of Chaco, worked in a brick factory since he was nine years old, and migrated to Buenos Aires to escape poverty. Raised by Mariela, he later said, “I see Mariela as a woman, and I will continue seeing her like that, as a mother” (in Muñoz 1993b).

It is difficult to find stories that deny that Mariela was what was considered a “good mother.” A police report states that “the children were raised excellently and there are several proofs that the couple loved them.”<sup>9</sup> The social approval was due to the confluence between parenting practices related to education and moral norms: the fact that her children were straight, employed, working-class people and had their own families helped legitimize her

---

<sup>9</sup> Intelligence Police Department of Buenos Aires Province (DIPBA), Mesa DS, no. 35333. 1993

motherhood. While Mariela was pushing the norm of motherhood beyond biology, she was at the same time affirming its conservative dimensions—the price she had to pay to be recognized as a woman and a mother.

Second, Mariela publicly de-emphasized her sexuality to embody what was expected from a mother. In several interviews she repeated, “When I had to choose between my children and a man, I chose my children” (ILGHRD and CUA V 1995), as a mechanism to distinguish herself from the press’s sexualization of transsexuals’ bodies. In contrast with the exultant figures of travestis, Mariela’s modest clothes erased the eroticism from her body by covering breasts and legs, her appearance converging with what the public expected from a mother.

This distinction allowed her to break down narratives that mocked transsexuals and to create narratives far from sex work, revues, and police stations. Her performance allowed her to be recognized as a female, a rare accomplishment for many transsexuals (Audras 2017). Mariela questioned the press for calling her a “travesti mother” and for accusing her of being involved in international child trafficking. She stated: “The Argentinean public was not fooled, I received empathy from everyone. I became the symbol of Argentinean motherhood” (ILGHRD and CUA V 1995).

Mariela refused to reduce her life to her sexuality: she embodied the figure of the mother as a nonsexual subject. When asked by journalists about her life before the gender-affirmation surgery, she defined herself as a virgin: “I did not know how I could have pleasure. I have never had sex before. My husband was my first man” (Muñoz 1993b).

**Mariela’s invoking of the virginal body constituted a reappropriation of the Catholic idea of immaculate conception** It was also linked to other maternal figures with no mediation of biological reproduction, such as Evita, whose rhetoric elevated her as the mother of the workers and of those in need.

Third, Mariela distinguished herself from the biological mothers of her children by emphasizing her maternal desire. Her explanation about the arrangement with their biological mothers pointed out that she helped them to avoid an abortion. She said, “I met a woman who was pregnant and did not want children. I asked her not to have an abortion. She in turn asked me to take care of her baby after birth. Another pregnant woman who did not want children allowed me to adopt her twin babies. She gave birth in a hospital where she was registered under my name” (ILGHRD and CUAUV 1995).

Abortion has been restricted in Argentina until 2020. It is estimated that 450,000 abortions were performed in Argentina in clandestine clinics or by people with no medical training, causing hundreds of deaths (Amnesty International Argentina 2018). Several testimonies show that people considered Mariela’s parenting a better option than abortion, as one of her neighbors declared : “I questioned myself, if it was better to have these children aborted before birth or to have Mariela raise them” (in Muñoz 1993b). Even if Mariela never expressed opposition to abortion, her use of its social rejection helped her win a wide range of popular support. In 1993 a journalist noticed that even if some priests spoke in public against Muñoz, a lot of Catholics valued her duty as a mother (in Muñoz 1993b). By performing a “good mother,” Mariela created a strong identification with a wider public; however, this performance was accompanied by an unwanted though effective demonization of her children’s biological mothers, who were portrayed as “bad mothers,” and by her “heroic” avoidance of abortion. This may have been the reason she was not especially supported by Argentine feminists. Moreover, the complete absence of the media’s discourses about biological fathers highlights the naturalization of the maternal “duty” of women to raise their children. In 1993 Mariela was invited to appear on the famous TV talk show *Almorzando con Mirtha Legrand*, whose host was an icon of the Argentine neoliberal and conservative era. Mirtha Legrand openly supported her: “She always surprises me, because

when you think of gays, travestis [you think of] people with irregular lives. [But] this woman has dedicated herself to take care of children, to educate them, to feed them, and it is admirable” (in Muñoz 1993a). In contrast with narratives focused on transsexual sexuality, some journalists and a wider public expressed empathy for Mariela’s maternal calling (Giberti 1997). The same year on TV, a psychologist stated that Mariela was a mother because “she adopted her children, it is not enough to give birth, you have to choose them” (in Muñoz 1997).

Fourth, Muñoz performed emotionally charged motherhood repertoires. In 1993, as Mariela left the police station breaking into tears, a journalist asked her, “The cry of a mother?” (in Muñoz 1993c). Mariela cried a lot in public, and every time she spoke about her children she became visibly overwhelmed. Rafael Fredda, former president of SIGLA (Society of the Integration of Gays and Lesbians in Argentina) remembers that at the beginning he thought it was a strategy she used to gain respect as a mother. However, when he became her friend, he noticed that there was an expression of “true feeling.”<sup>10</sup> Even if crying was a valuable practice, **It was a symptom of her suffering expressed by an expected body language to be performed in public by women.** In the negotiation of Mariela’s motherhood, crying was understood as a way of showing her “real love for the children” (in Muñoz 1993b).

In contrast with the alleged male rationality, women’s complaints have been represented as emotional and inevitably guided by “maternal love.” In 1993 Mariela wrote a letter from jail: “I want to express my anguish because they have taken my children away from my arms, knowing that I can’t provide them with the love they need. I want you to understand my feelings as a woman and a mother” (*El popular* 1993). By highlighting

---

<sup>10</sup> Rafael Fredda, pers. comm., July 27, 2020.

sadness, love, pain, and crying, she publicly reaffirmed her bond with her children.

Moreover, the metaphor of the theft from her arms activated the image of children appropriations denounced by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.

Fifth, she created a chain of meanings in which womanhood was expressed by becoming a mother. As the relationship between womanhood and motherhood was at the core of Argentine gender culture, Mariela's social acknowledgment as a mother helped her achieve a broader recognition as a transsexual woman. Muñoz was the first transsexual to get legal recognition of her self-perceived gender. While the judge decision was based on the constitutional ban on discrimination, Mariela's popularity was decisive. After this recognition, different journalists valued Mariela's attitude as a "good woman" and "mother." When Mariela visited Legrand's TV Show, the host held Mariela's national identity document and said: "This is amazing, it is a revolution. Congratulations, here you have the document where it says that you are a lady" (in Muñoz 2000). Mariela's recognition on national TV as a lady by the national icon of traditional upper-class conservative femininity was a starting point to imagine a potential new citizenship that could integrate transsexual experience under normative rules.

Mariela had a long path affirming her gender. In 1981 Mariela traveled to Chile to obtain gender-affirmation surgery, a practice that was forbidden in Argentina.<sup>11</sup> However, coming back after the change was difficult. Several attempts to get her identity documents to reflect her gender-affirmation surgery were denied. Mariela presented herself as a woman and downplayed her transsexual identity. When she described her relationship with her husband

---

<sup>11</sup> In 1944 decree no. 6216 prohibited any intervention that led to women's sterilization without considering any treatment to conserve reproductive organs. Another law, passed in 1967, explicitly stated that it was forbidden to practice any surgery that modified the "sick's sex, except ones allowed by a justice authorization" (Farji Neer 2017).

and children, she insisted that she did not tell them about her being a transsexual before pursuing the surgery. Mariela popularized the theory of the “incorrect body,” a mainstream narrative in the 1990s and early 2000s with which some transsexuals legitimated their demands for gender-affirmation treatments (Wayar 2020). As one of her neighbors declared: “She is a woman in the body of a man. A small piece of meat does not define her sex” (in Muñoz 1993b).

In 1997 a court ordered the state to rectify Mariela’s birth certificate to recognize her gender as female, on the basis that the state could not violate the constitutional principle that banned discrimination. Mariela’s petition was part of a wider strategy of transsexuals and travestis that included organizing demonstrations and presenting lawsuits demanding access to surgery and modification of legal documents. Muñoz, along with other activists, cleared the way for a long struggle of the Argentine trans\* movement that in 2012 achieved the enactment of the Gender Identity Law, which recognizes self-perceived gender and mandates private and public health systems to provide free gender-affirmation treatments (Theumer 2020).

**Sixthly, Mariela took motherhood beyond the feminist, lesbian, and gay agenda, although she created tensions with part of this agenda** On the one hand, Mariela’s case was at odds with the denaturalization of women’s role as caregivers, as promoted by lesbian and feminist movements. On the other hand, Mariela’s story was closer to the gay movement’s familist rhetoric in its quest for civil union recognition (Vespucchi 2014). In contrast to the traditional press, lesbian, gay, and feminist publications gave scarce visibility to Mariela’s struggle.<sup>12</sup> Fredda highlighted that some of the leaders felt uncomfortable with

---

<sup>12</sup> Gays for Civil Rights (GAYDC) and the Society for Lesbian and Gay Integration in Argentina (SIGLA) gave explicit support in their magazines. See: Confidencial (Julio) 1993, p. 3. Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas . Buenos Aires. .

Muñoz's discourse and insisted that she changed it.<sup>13</sup> Maria Luisa Peralta, who participated in *Lesbianas a la Vista* (Visible Lesbians) since 1996, remembers: "In the 1990s, motherhood was not a popular topic among feminist groups. Lesbians had an agenda for those who had sons and daughters of their previous straight marriages, they were at risk of losing their children for being lesbians. But the topic of lesbian motherhood [that also implied adoptive mothers like Mariela] did not emerge until the end of the decade."<sup>14</sup>

Travestis and transsexuals faced several obstacles in their quest to be included in lesbian and gay politics, as some of the latter believed that the presence of the former would delegitimize their goal of inclusion in the wider society. Lohana Berkins (2003 : 61) described how they had to fight for their visibility. Although the travestis and transsexuals contributed money for demonstrations, some refused to name them on pamphlets and banners.<sup>15</sup>

In 1996 SIGLAS's newspaper highlighted the difficulties of working with Mariela in light of the "debates between travestis, transsexuals and feminists."<sup>16</sup> As Berkins expressed, some cisgender feminists refused to recognize the travesti movement and forbade their participation in the "National Women's Gathering."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Peralta remembers that

---

América Lee. [http://americalee.cedinci.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ConfidencialArgentina\\_n9.pdf](http://americalee.cedinci.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ConfidencialArgentina_n9.pdf) .

<sup>13</sup> Rafael Fredda, pers. comm., July 27, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Luisa Peralta, pers. comm., August 20, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> In 1995, after three demonstrations, the pride demonstration changed its name to "Gay, Lesbian, Travesti, Transsexual, and Bisexual" in recognition of their participation (Alvarez 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Rafael Fredda and Fotografía Alejandro Correo, "Organizaciones," NX, no. 31, 1996, p. 28+. Archives of Sexuality and Gender. Buenos Aires.

<sup>17</sup> The *Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres* or "National Women's Gathering" convenes thousands of women since 1985. The meeting rotates locations throughout Argentina every year, and participants usually save up and fundraise to attend.



Mariela did not have a feminist perspective about gender roles; she was considered “quite traditional for publicly advocating for women’s fulfilment through motherhood.”<sup>18</sup> Even if some lesbians supported her, Mariela’s agenda was considered a threat to their quest for the right to access legal abortions.

Finally, Mariela’s participation in traditional party politics transformed her struggle to perform motherhood into a metaphor for social justice and a criticism of the neoliberal project. In 1997 she became the first transsexual candidate to run in an election by participating in the Peronist primaries as a contender of the official candidate Hilda Beatriz González “Chiche” Duhalde, a conservative Peronist woman who created a system of social policies based on women’s participation during the 1990s.

Mariela challenged the Peronist establishment in the context of a party leading the neoliberal project. After two administrations, the Peronist Carlos Menem deeply transformed Argentina: he disassembled the social state, promoted the deindustrialization, privatized state-owned companies, and created macroeconomic policies that tied Argentina’s currency to the US dollar. Under the United States’ influence, the government became a global example of neoliberalism by reaching new economic heights and promoting financial stability. However, the collateral effects of these politics created a crisis: in 1995 unemployment was 18 percent, and poverty quickly increased to 50 percent of the country’s population (Masson 2004).

Mariela stated, “I only agree with stability, but there are several social inequalities” (*Crónica* 1997a). She appropriated Peronist narratives by highlighting that she wanted to “continue with the example of Eva Perón, my idol. I want to do something for the people that need me. I have always been supportive, I have raised seventeen children and that too is social policy” (*Crónica* 1997). Her reference to Evita as an icon of social justice was again in

---

<sup>18</sup> Maria Luisa Peralta, pers. comm., August 20, 2020.

line with her paradigm of women's responsibilities for the care of those most in need, in this case as the "female face" of the state. Mariela performed her motherhood as a symbol of the failures of the male economic regime: taking care of abandoned children and mothers without any social protection (Biernat and Ramacciotti 2013). After Mariela criticized the irregular conditions in which the primaries were taking place, her house was attacked by gunfire. She then decided to give up her candidacy (*Crónica* 1997b). She continued participating in politics, running again as a candidate for parliament in the 2000s, but never succeeded. Even if her participation was not the main factor for the transformation of citizenship, Mariela's transsexual politics, and her uses of maternity and caregiving in the frame of the neoliberal regime's crisis, helped pave the way for the future emergence of travesti and transsexual rights.

<SEC>

Mariela Muñoz's struggle for social recognition as a mother and woman faced the daily marginalization of poverty and cis-sexism. By deploying a wide maternal political repertoire, giving political value to care and amplifying the margins for transsexual social recognition, she participated in redefining intimate citizenship. Mariela's maternal citizenship paradoxically combined traditional notions of womanhood—such as fulfilment through motherhood—with the expansion of socially accepted boundaries for travestis and transsexuals. **Through her agenda, she criticized the male-dominated neoliberal project by valorizing care as social politics while at the same time channeling the popular rejection of abortion.**

Her trajectory defied the limits of cis-gendered and antimaternal feminisms and showed how demands that could be initially considered conservative can lead to unexpected public support and legitimation of a marginalized community. Mariela was not, then, necessarily the victim of patriarchal rule but a political subject with agency that fought for

her rights. She struggled to create a new horizon in the frame of a very conservative society in which transphobia and discrimination were, and still are, prevalent.

Mariela's story, unlike many studies of care, is evidence that caring or mothering does not necessarily hinder women's possibilities. Mariela's maternalist and caregiving repertoires are alternatives within the local symbolic limits of what is intelligible and possible. Those repertoires have political validity and force, not because the feminization of care or maternalism in any of its forms are natural, but precisely because that is how they are perceived. Therein lies their power. Their agency cannot be noticed unless it is based on situated knowledge and in nonmetropolitan-centric views or academic or political desires of Northern feminisms.

**Johana Kunin** has a PhD in social anthropology from École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, France, Advanced Social Studies School; San Martin National University; Argentina. She is a CONICET Postdoctoral Fellow. She researches the relationship of environment, care, and gender in pesticide-based agricultural production in the Argentine Pampas. She is a social anthropology lecturer at IDAES/UNSAM and coordinator of the Situated Motherhoods and Motherings Study Circle at UNSAM.

**Patricio Simonetto** has a PhD in social and human sciences from Quilmes University (Argentina). He holds a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship at the Institute of the Americas, University College London. He is a research assistant at the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (Argentina). He specializes in the social history and culture of sexuality in Latin America and is the author of *Money is not everything. The purchase and sale of sex in Argentina in the 20th century* (2022); *El dinero no es todo: La compra y venta de sexo en la Argentina del siglo XX* (2019), and *Entre la injuria y la revolución: El Frente de Liberación Homosexual en la Argentina* (2017).

## Acknowledgments

We are thankful with the contributions of Thomas Shalloe, Maria Audras, María Luisa Peralta, and Rafael Fredda. This research is funded by the MSCA project 886496.

## References

Adair, Jennifer. 2019. *In Search of the Lost Decade: Everyday Rights in Post-dictatorship Argentina*. Oakland: University of California Press.

- Álvarez, María Inés Fernández, and Florencia Partenio. 2010. "Empresas recuperadas en Argentina: Producciones, espacios y tiempos de género." *Tabula rasa*, no. 12: 119–35.
- Amnesty International Argentina. 2018. *Aportes al debate sobre derechos sexuales y reproductivos*. [amnistia.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2016/09/Medici%C3%B3n-de-abortos-Clandestinos.pdf](http://amnistia.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/delightful-downloads/2016/09/Medici%C3%B3n-de-abortos-Clandestinos.pdf).
- Audras, M. 2016. *Amor a paso gigante*. Argentina-France. Independent production.
- Barrancos, Dora. 2010. "Mujeres en la Argentina: Un balance frente al Bicentenario." *Revista de trabajo* 6, no. 8: 323–31.
- Bellucci, Mabel. 2010. *Orgullo: Carlos Jáuregui, una biografía política*. Buenos Aires: Emecé.
- Berkins, Lohana. 2003. "Un itinerario político del travestismo." In *Sexualidades Migrantes: Género y Transgénero*, edited by Diana Maffía, 59-68. Buenos Aires: Scarlett.
- Berkins, Lohana, Renata Hiller, Aluminé Moreno, and Ana Mallimaci. 2015. *Cumbia, copeteo y lágrimas: Informe nacional sobre la situación de las travestis, transexuales y transgéneros*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Madres de Plaza de Mayo.
- Biblarz, Timothy J., and Evren Savci. 2010. "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3: 480–97.
- Biernat, Carolina, and Karina Inés Ramacciotti. 2013. *Crecer y multiplicarse: La política sanitaria materno-infantil. Argentina 1900–1960*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.
- Crónica*. 1997a. "Mariela Muñoz candidata." June 24.
- Crónica*. 1997b. "Mariela Muñoz se retira de la elección." July 25.

- D'Antonio, Débora. 2018. "Redes de denuncias políticas y jurídicas por violaciones a los derechos humanos en el plano internacional: El rol de las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Argentina, 1976–1983)." *Travesía: Revista de historia económica y social* 20, no. 2: 15–44.
- Di Liscia, María Herminia Beatriz. 2008. "Mujeres en los movimientos sociales en Argentina: un balance del último siglo." *Cadernos de estudios Latino-Americanos*, no. 6: 141–80.
- El popular*. 1993. "Madre transsexual." May 24.
- Farji Neer, Anahí. 2017. *Travestismo, transexualidad y trasgeneridad en los discursos del Estado Argentino: Desde los edictos policiales hasta la ley de identidad de género*. Buenos Aires: Teseo.
- Fernández Romero, Francisco. 2020. "'We Can Conceive Another History': Trans Activism around Abortion Rights in Argentina." *International Journal of Transgender Health* 22, nos. 1–2: 1–15.
- Florencia de la V. 2013. "El descargo de Flor de la V." Telefe, November 18. YouTube video, 8:44. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNyYLY7QQqc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNyYLY7QQqc).
- Fonseca, Claudía. 2002. "Inequality Near and Far: Adoption as Seen from the Brazilian Favelas." *Law and Society Review* 36, no. 2: 397–432. [doi.org/10.2307/1512182](https://doi.org/10.2307/1512182).
- Giberti, Eva. 1997. "Mariela Muñoz, el derecho a la diferencia." *Clarín*, May 27.
- Gibson, Margaret F. 2014. *Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives*. Bradford, ON: Demeter.

- ILGHRD (International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission) and CUAV (Community United Against Violence). 1995. *The International Tribunal on Human Rights Violations against Sexual Minorities*. New York City, October 17.
- Israel, Gianna E. 2005. "Translove: Transgender Persons and Their Families." *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 1, no. 1: 53–67.
- James-Abra, Sarah, L. A. Tarasoff, D. Green, Rachel Epstein, Scott Anderson, Stu Marvel, L. S. Steele, and L. E. Ross. 2015. "Trans People's Experiences with Assisted Reproduction Services: A Qualitative Study." *Human Reproduction* 30, no. 6: 1365–74.
- Manning, Kimberley, Cindy Holmes, Annie Pullen Sansfacon, Julia Temple Newhook, and Ann Travers. 2015. "Fighting for Trans\* Kids: Academic Parent Activism in the Twenty-First Century." *Studies in Social Justice* 9, no. 1: 118–35.
- Masson, Laura. 2004. *La política en femenino: Género y poder en la provincia de Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Centro de Antropología.
- Muñoz, Mariela. 1993a. "1993—Mirtha Legrand—Mariela Muñoz." Videos SIGLA. YouTube video, 8:27. [youtube.com/watch?v=kcr3eBHARrY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcr3eBHARrY).
- Muñoz, Mariela. 1993b. "DiFilm—Mariela Muñoz—Transsexual (1993)." ArchivoDiChiara, January 4, 2015. YouTube video, 4:53. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3A4R1R7RF4).
- Muñoz, Mariela. 1993c. "Mariela Muñoz sale en libertad 1993." DeFilm, October 20, 2018. YouTube video, 2:38. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQgiypIJnFs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQgiypIJnFs).
- Muñoz, Mariela. 1997. "1997—Fte a fte—Mariela Muñoz concejala." Videos SIGLA. YouTube video, 9:59. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSjni-kDIok](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSjni-kDIok).

- Muñoz, Mariela. 2000. "2000—Mirtha Legrand—Mariela Muñoz." Videos SIGLA. YouTube video, 9:57. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=09kKzlivSdY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09kKzlivSdY)
- Nari, Marcela M. A. 2004. *Políticas de maternidad y maternalismo político: Buenos Aires, 1890–1940*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos.
- Pérez, Inés. 2020. "Domestic Workers' Experiences of Motherhood in Mid-twentieth-century Buenos Aires." *Women's History Review* 30, no. 2: **208–22**.
- Platero Méndez, Lucas, and Esther Ortega Arjonilla. 2017. *Investigación sociológica sobre las personas transexuales y sus experiencias familiares*. Madrid: Transexualia.
- Plummer, Keith. 2011. *Intimate citizenship: Private decisions and public dialogues*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Theumer, Emmanuel. 2020. "The Self-Perceived Gender Identity." *Interventions* 22, no. 4: 498–513.
- Vespucci, Guido. 2014. "Una fórmula deseable: El discurso 'somos familias' como símbolo hegemónico de las reivindicaciones gay-lésbicas." *Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad (Rio de Janeiro)*, no. 17: 30–65.
- Wayar, Marlene. 2020. *Diccionario travesti de la T a la T*. Buenos Aires: Página 12.
- Zarco, Abril. 2011. "Maternalismo, identidad colectiva y participación política: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo." *Revista punto género*, no. 1: 229–47.